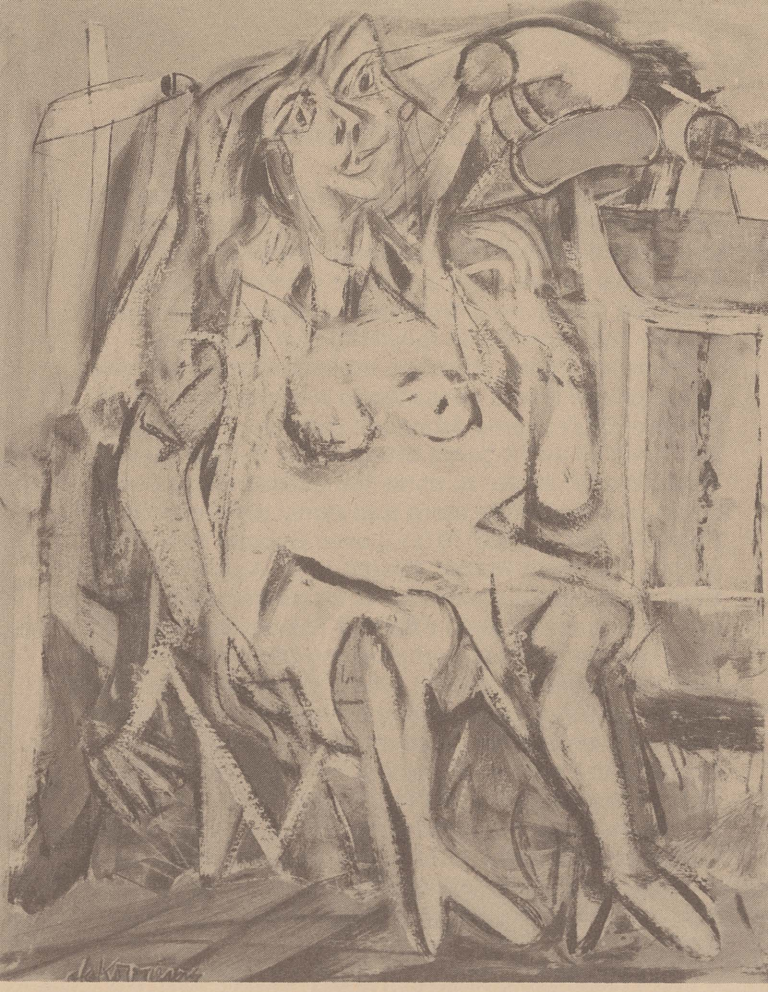

Willem de Kooning, *Figure.*

THE FIGURE DE KOONING TO WARHOL

THE FIGURE: DE KOONING TO WARHOL

Traditionally, the human figure holds an honored position in Western art. From pre-historic cave painting to the contemporary "new realism," the rendering of the figure has ranged from a precise mirror image, to an idealized reality, to a distorted image, and back again, though not necessarily following that sequence.

There are times, however, in the history of art when figure painting was relegated to a minor position. In the late 1940s, some American painters, influenced by the influx of avant-garde artists from Europe during World War II, strove to enter the mainstream of contemporary art. While more traditional artists such as Fairfield Porter (1907-1975) [Lower Special Exhibition Gallery, Fairfield Porter: Realist in an Age of Abstraction] continued the heritage of figure painting, these innovators, later called Abstract Expressionists, stressed the process and meaning of painting rather than the subject depicted. Using large-scale canvases, thickly textured paint, and improvisational brushwork, they emphasized the freedom, spontaneity, and instinct of the individual. Artists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline, while rejecting the figure, rejoiced in the energetic and gestural application of pure paint. Other early Abstract Expressionists, such as Mark Rothko, also rejected the figure but, unlike the gestural painters, developed compositions based on large, colored shapes.

Though many of the Abstract Expressionists had successfully eliminated the object from the painted surface, one of the movement's most important artists—Willem de Kooning (b. 1904)—developed the human form as his principal subject in the late forties and early fifties [**1**]. His series of *Women* is not only reminiscent of prehistoric fertility idols and the Venus of classical antiquity, but it is also the forerunner of Andy Warhol's *Marilyns* and *Lizes.*

De Kooning's *Women* influenced younger artists to pursue a new kind of figural art, the most notable being Richard Diebenkorn (b. 1922). Working in the San Francisco Bay area, Diebenkorn turned after 1955 from painting gestural abstractions [**2**] to depicting the human figure [**3, 4**]. In his figural work, Diebenkorn combined the Abstract Expressionist use of thick paint and vibrant color with images of the human form existing in defined spaces.

The figures that developed out of Abstract Expressionism were not based on traditional imagery. The time-honored practice of working from nature—employing models and executing anatomical studies as preparation for painting—was disregarded. Instead, the artists used the formal qualities of brushwork, color, and line to shape the figure.

Existing simultaneously with the abstract expressionistic painting of de Kooning and Diebenkorn was the realistic figural work of Fairfield Porter.

Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, Porter worked from nature and drew his subjects from the world about him. He painted his family and friends, in or around the house. His figures, unlike de Kooning's and Diebenkorn's, suggest contentment. Like the Abstract Expressionists, however, Porter emphasized the physical qualities of paint. Essentially a painter of light and air, he also owed much to French Impressionism.

Linking the New York Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s to the Pop artists of the early 1960s are Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930). Rauschenberg, in establishing a new vocabulary for the art to come, employs the everyday "found object" in his work to illustrate the image of modern American life. His *Gloria* [5] of 1956, for example, introduced newsprint (a repeated photograph and accompanying article announcing the third marriage of Gloria Vanderbilt) and, by doing so, emphasized an interest in mass-production. Thick paint applied in a rough and vigorous manner reveals Rauschenberg's debt to Abstract Expressionism.

George Segal (b. 1914) began his career painting figural works in the manner of Abstract Expressionists like de Kooning and Diebenkorn. Today, Segal is known for his white plaster cast figures—made by wrapping real subjects in plaster soaked bandages. Segal often uses the resulting figures to create scenes of everyday life with the addition of real objects. By placing a stark white figure against a dark background, as in *The Red Light* [6], Segal suggests mankind's isolation.

A radical break from the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism and a new return to figurative work emerged during the early 1960s. Pop Art—which borrowed its subjects from popular culture—was an essentially American phenomenon. In taking banal im-

ages from everyday American life, Pop artists illustrated the new American "landscape." Fascinated by the technological aspects of society, they depicted mass-produced images in a style aligned with mass production itself. Many of their images were taken directly out of the slick world of advertising and, not surprisingly, many of the influential Pop artists began their careers in commercial art.

Andy Warhol (b. 1930) is perhaps the most famous and controversial of the Pop artists. Through a commercial silkscreen process, he reproduces already existing photographic images of people—often of popular celebrities—onto the traditional canvas. Warhol's isolated images on canvas of Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor [**7**], and Jacqueline Kennedy [**8**] become "icons" for the American audience.

Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923) based his early Pop images on the comic strip [**9**]. He subtly simulated this art form in both content and style, right down to painting the Benday dots that characterize cheap printed reproduction. Lichtenstein's paintings—often parodies of love or war—illustrate human feelings and actions in a highly technological society.

Like Warhol and Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist (b. 1933) is concerned with people in an urban environment. With his early experience as a billboard painter, Rosenquist is at ease enlarging familiar images to a gigantic scale. Some of his works are huge collages of magnified details of everyday objects [**10**]. But unlike Warhol and Lichtenstein, Rosenquist infuses some social criticism into his art, most often alluding to the struggle between man and his environment, and between life and death.

The art of Alex Katz (b. 1927) lies between the semi-abstract figure paintings of Fairfield Porter and the slick images of Pop Art [**11, 12**]. Although identified with today's "new realism," Katz's bold compositions of friends and famous people, rendered in a highly mechanical technique, date as far back as 1959. His work combines Fairfield Porter's flat, hard, clear light with an expressive use of color. Katz also employs the techniques of enlarging, cropping, and editing favored by so many Pop artists.

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The Cleveland Museum of Art
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DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY & EDUCATION

Andy Warhol, *Liz Taylor.*

Catalogue Listing

1 Willem de Kooning, American (born in Holland), b. 1904. *Figure.* Oil on cardboard, 1949, signed lower left, 18-3/8 x 14-1/2 inches. Contemporary Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art, CMA 64.1 [reproduced on cover]

2 Richard Diebenkorn, American, b. 1922. *Berkeley #42.* Oil on canvas, 1955, initialed and dated lower right, 57-1/2 x 51-1/2 inches. Contemporary Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art, CMA 68.95

3 Richard Diebenkorn, American, b. 1922. *Woman Wearing a Flower.* Oil on canvas, 1958, initialed and dated lower right, 26 x 22 inches. Contemporary Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art, CMA 65.14

4 Richard Diebenkorn, American, b. 1922. *Girl Squatting.* Oil on canvas, 1960, initialed and dated lower right, 26 x 21 inches. Akron Art Museum

5 Robert Rauschenberg, American, b. 1925. *Gloria.* Oil and paper collage on canvas, 1956, 66-1/4 x 63-1/4 inches. Gift of The Cleveland Society for Contemporary Art, CMA 66.333

6 George Segal, American, b. 1924. *The Red Light.* Plaster and mixed media, 1972, 114 x 96 x 36 inches. Purchase, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund, CMA 74.22 a-d [photoreproduction]

7 Andy Warhol, American, b. 1930. *Liz Taylor.* Offset lithograph printed in color, 1964, signed and dated lower right, 21-15/16 x 21-15/16 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Steinberg in memory of Katherine C. White, CMA 80.220 [reproduced on overleaf]

8 Andy Warhol, American, b. 1930. *Jackie.* Silkscreen on canvas, 1964, signed on reverse, 20 x 16 inches. Akron Art Museum

9 Roy Lichtenstein, American, b. 1923. *Shipboard Girl.* Offset lithograph printed in color, 1965, signed lower right, 26-1/16 x 19-1/8 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Steinberg in memory of Anne Steinberg Heilbrunn, CMA 80.215

10 James Rosenquist, American, b. 1933. *F-111.* Color lithograph, 1974, each section signed and dated lower right, south 36-1/2 x 69-3/4 in., west 36 x 75 in., north 36-1/2 x 69-3/4 x 75 in., east 36-1/4 x 75 in. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ronald J. Ross, CMA 82.1000 a, b, c

11 Alex Katz, American, b. 1927. *Self-Portrait.* Lithograph printed in color, signed lower left, 37-7/16 x 23-1/16 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Steinberg in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Trenkamp, Jr., on their fiftieth year of membership in The Print Club of Cleveland, CMA 74.69

12 Alex Katz, American, b. 1927. *Impala.* Oil on canvas, 1968, 72 x 96 inches. Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund and Gift of Eppler Family Foundation and Agnes Gund Saalfield, Sundry Purchase Art, CMA 83.68